

## Notes and Reflections on the Reports

Summary of points made to the Research Design Workshop on "The Participatory Design of On-farm Experiments" held at the Narendra Dev University of Agriculture and Technology, Narendra Nagar, Faizabad, U.P., on 15th February 1990

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### Interviewing

Interviewing is like management or lecturing; we are inclined to think we know how to do it without training. With interviewing rural people there is the additional difficulty that our professional training has often misled us into believing that "we" know and "they" are ignorant, that we are the teachers and they are the learners. But the whole point of an interview is to reverse this, for us to be the students, for it to be us who learn from them. To do this well is not always easy, and often does not come naturally to those who have had strict professional training. Just as with management and lecturing, so with the art and science of interviewing, there are attitudes and skills which can be taught and learnt.

To help, there is a good literature on interviewing, including the paper by Somluckrat and Terry Grandstaff on "Semi-structured interviewing" in the Khon Kaen volume, Robert Rhoades' little handbook "The Art of the Informal Agricultural Interview", and most recently Krishna Kumar's small manual "Conducting Key Informant Interviews in Development Countries".

Coming to the reports of the groups, five points are worth comments:

#### 1. The timing of an interview

There are good times and bad times for people to be interviewed, just as there are good times and bad times for delivering a lecture. 2.30 in the afternoon is a bad time to lecture, as people are often sleepy; at such a time only the foolhardy will accept an invitation to talk to a group such as ourselves. Even more so, there are good and bad times for rural people to be met. Quite often these are times which are inconvenient for outsiders, such as early in the morning or after dark at night. Time of interview is especially critical with women since they tend to have more pressing commitments throughout the day than men. Conscious choice is needed. In a training exercise such as our own now, it is

difficult to go to villages at the times that are most convenient for villagers. But good interviews are more likely when people are at ease, not worrying about what other things they should be doing, or things that they have to do next. And the best way to ensure they are at ease is to allow them to choose the time of interview themselves.

## ii. The value of groups

Comments were made on the way in which interviewees could be suspicious when they were outnumbered by the interviewers. This does sometimes happen, but by no means always. Much depends on the quality of the interview, including how interesting the person being interviewed finds it. However, when those being interviewed outnumber the interviewers the balance of power does shift, and quite often people are more forthcoming. Also, paradoxically, for some sensitive subjects, people are more ready to speak in a group where everyone can hear them than on their own where it might be thought they were passing confidential information of some sort. Groups can have several other advantages, including cross-checking information, the wider range of knowledge that is available to be tapped, and creativity through discussion within the group itself. Group interviewing has other strengths and weaknesses, and a source of advice is Krishna Kumar's manual Conducting Group Interviews in Developing Countries, AID Programme Design and Evaluation Methodology Report No. 8, USAID Washington, April 1987.

## iii. Speed of interviewing

Some of you interviewed at astonishing speed. And in consequence, the number of groups of male farmers and of women interviewed is impressive. This has the advantage of lending itself to a comparison of responses in some of the tables which have been presented. However, speed has many disadvantages. Information is not cross-checked. Information that we do not know to ask for is unlikely to come to light. Analysis by the group itself is also unlikely. Follow up on group interviews may also be difficult. But group interviews are often best as part of a sequence of relaxed and unhurried exploration, leading to the identification of unexpected information and of key informants, and to further interviews in a sort of chain.

#### iv. Division of roles among interviewers

In some cases you reported that farmers were suspicious because the outsiders' roles had been divided between three people, with one person interviewing, one recording, and one observing and not speaking. In some cases farmers wondered why one person was remaining silent. There are no absolute rules about roles, and any team must be sensitive and adapt to the conditions of a particular interview. With interviews in other places, farmers have not been suspicious of one person keeping quiet. I am inclined to stick to the recommendation of division of roles between three persons, but with flexibility. The team should always discuss roles in advance before interviews.

#### v. Skills, attitudes, and behaviour

One of the reporters said that skill in interviewing was more important than language. I would go further and say that skills, attitudes and behaviour are curcial for good interviewing. But even good interviewers can have bad interviews. Really bad interviews should usually be terminated, and an effort made to learn constructive lessons from the experience.

There are number of don'ts and dos in interviewing. Here are some short lists:

#### Donts

- \* Lecturing. Don't lecture to people. There is a wide-spread tendency to talk too much, and to treat people as though they are ignorant, instead of sitting down, and listening and learning from them. Nothing drives out rural people's readiness to give good information, or to be creative in their thinking, more than being lectured to by outsiders. The more "we" lecture, the more ignorant "they" appear to us!
- \* Authoritarian behaviour. Quite unconsciously, some outsiders tend to boss villagers around, for instance in getting them together for an interview. This may be accentuated where there are official visitors for whom meetings are to be arranged. A friendly, open and willing atmosphere is an important precondition for a good interview.
- \* Dress and demeanour. One way we signal what sort of people we are is our dress. These signals are picked up by villagers. Smart or formal city clothes may not help in initial rapport.

- \* Language and interaction. Outsiders often want to talk together in a language not understood by villagers (sometimes English). They are then being exclusive. If outsiders have to talk together in this way, a good rule is to translate to villagers whatever has been said.

### Dos.

Among the many tips about good interviewing the following are worth mentioning:

- \* be interested in what is being said, and enthusiastic about information provided, but without indicating what responses you want to hear
- \* arrange seating so that interviewers and respondents are on the same level, for example all sitting on the ground, or all sitting on charpoys. Interviewers should not usually sit in a superior position such as at tables and chairs while interviewees sit on the ground at their feet.
- \* respect. Respect for people as people is fundamental to good interviewing.
- \* warm up. A good interview is often preceded by activities which have little to do with it, like taking an interest in the environment, in people, or in things. Sometimes "acting the fool", or participating in an activity which is going on in the village, can help with rapport before an interview starts.
- \* participatory diagramming can also help, by eliciting the creativity of respondents, and in showing that it is they who are presenting information rather than outsiders.

### Diagrams

The diagrams designed by groups for eliciting farmers' priorities for research topics were modified. Unfortunately, some of the earlier versions were thrown away. But it is revealing to look at the sequences. For example seasonal charts were changed to drawings of activities by season in an attempt to make the diagrams more readily intelligible to farmers.

Another time it would be useful to find out how farmers would draw the diagrams, and how these compared with our ideas of what they would find easy to understand.



One danger is bias in the way diagrams are drawn. For example when a representation shows a spindly and sparse crop giving way to a robust and high yielding stand of the crop, this may incline farmers to choose that research topic.

The size of the cards or pieces of paper presented to farmers is worth consideration. Choices by farmers may be easiest when cards are of medium size. One group laid the papers representing different choices out on a charpoy in the ranking sequence which farmers gave. This sounds good as everyone can see what is being said, and can have the opportunity to argue about possible changes. Visibility to many people, and ease of discussion and alteration, are some of the strengths of shared diagrams.

### Women and men

It was valuable that women were consulted separately from men, but notable that as usual there were fewer interviews with women than with men. This recurrent problem needs repeated and resolute attention.

It was striking that with one group women identified four criteria which men had not, notably food, fodder, fuel, and thatch. It was also striking that in another group women were emphatically not in favour of pisciculture. It would be good to know the reasons.

The finding that the priorities were the same with men interviewed by men and women interviewed by women is puzzling. This conflicts with almost universal findings elsewhere, and deserves to be probed and understood. More credible was the finding of the last group that women had a different ranking priority from men.

The \$64,000 question is what you do when women's priorities are different from those of men. This question has not been answered.

One significant finding worth attention, although it is common knowledge, was that because they do not work in the fields women in resource-rich households had different priorities from women in resource-poor households.

### Time available

The "rapid" in Rapid Rural Appraisal can be misleading. It is easy to be rapid and wrong. A better word, as used by K C John, is "relaxed" rural appraisal. Hurry drives out

participation, hides information we do not know to ask about, and limits or eliminates cross-checking, follow up, and probing. Coming back and meeting the same people a second or third time can often be valuable in gaining confidence, rapport and better information and insight. It is vital to be able to follow up leads, for example when people say "I have got something I would like to take you to see".

Plenty of time, patience, and the opportunity to take a general interest in village life all help. Participation takes time, and cannot be rushed.

### Identifying research topics

The number of research topics identified by these methods was striking. Group one identified 17, group two 13, and group three 12. Although not all of these were strictly research topics, the number is still impressive. In addition, as Dr R K Singh pointed out, farmers' ideas of research can generate ideas for on-station research, as with the adventitious rooting of sugarcane in high water conditions, and the farmers' idea that jute fibre was weak when intercropped. In my view, a main strength of the approaches you have been following is eliciting research topics, getting together a farmers' agenda which is different from that scientists would think of on their own.

### Learning farmers' technologies and trials

Learning about farmers' own technologies and their own trials and experimental frontiers has been a neglected area. We lag behind in our knowledge of current technologies used by farmers. One example is the tools they use. Farmers consistently ranked trials with different tools lowest in their choices of research topics. This may be connected with their having made modifications to tools themselves, for example ploughs, which are already better adapted than the tools shown in the diagram.

More generally, there is a case for persistently trying to find out what farmers' current technologies are, and what their experiments are. One good question here is:

"What new practices have you tried out in the past year, or in recent years?" This question can lead into an understanding of farmers' own experimental frontiers, and of the problems and opportunities which they perceive and are trying to solve or exploit.

### Value of this experience to others

A vital element in the innovations in methods and style which you are developing is the willingness and ability to be self critical. You have shown this in your reports. Recognising error, and embracing it instead of burying it, is a key to learning. All too often, we try to hide mistakes. When we have the courage to say "ahha!" when something goes wrong, and take it as an opportunity for learning rather than a cause for shame, we have an opportunity to gain in understanding. This is a style of behaviour which differs from that normal in hierarchical bureaucracies. It is, though, a key to the rapid progressive learning which is necessary if rainfed farming, and small and poor farmers, are to be adequately and efficiently served.

In conclusion, let me urge you to share your experiences with others and to spread the methods which you are adopting and developing. In the short run there may be difficulties. Sometimes, institutions and colleagues are threatened and hostile to new approaches to work. In the short run, those who innovate may not be rewarded with promotion or recognition. However, with farmer participation in research there are now an increasing number of people around the world who are on the same wavelength, increasingly supporting one another. More and more journals are willing to accept articles on experiences with these methods, including mistakes made and lessons learnt. There are opportunities to publish in periodicals such as RRA Notes. I believe the 1990s will see whole institutions following the example of the University of Khon Kaen in Thailand, and changing their style of teaching, their methods of field work, and their culture of investigation and research. It is not only politically, and in the USSR, Eastern Europe and Southern Africa, that change is now much more rapid than anyone expected. Professionally, too, all over the world, change is accelerating, with a new openness. Those of you who now make personal reversals, put farmers first, and change your approaches and methods in research, will find yourself in a vanguard, leading the way for others. Let me wish you all success, and hope that through mutual support you can build up critical masses of professionals who will serve small and poor farmers much better than we have been able to in the past.